

# Phantasia

by Darien Meredith  
([darydith@gmail.com](mailto:darydith@gmail.com))

## Volume Three

11: Fear

12: Phantasia's Power

13: This is Who I Am

14: An Audience with Wotan

15: Kidnap

Disclaimer

This isn't a finished work, so you might spot some errors!

For printer/e-reader friendliness, all illustrations have been removed.

**Check out [www.phantasiaonline.com](http://www.phantasiaonline.com) for the ongoing story!**

## Fear

Phantasia could sense their arrival before they made themselves known. Her church was located at the purest point in Torsten, and without fear of corruption she was able to keep her senses open to everything in the vicinity. Their approach was like a black cloud creeping across the early-autumn sky, sending waves of disruption across the untainted streams of mana. Just one day since Phoenie and Katrina had helped her weary body back here, the two girls had returned – and they weren't alone.

Joel was a stain of raw emotion on the aether, his bony fists clenched tight as he struggled to contain the violent urges threatening to engulf him. But more telling was the absence of Kaori; Phantasia had never seen the couple apart before.

“Ms Celeste, there has been a situation,” said Phoenie as she strode up the aisle towards her, “Mr Gibson informs me that Kaori Shimomura and Shelley Edwards are under the influence of the leansídhe.”

Phantasia's pale feet brushed the worn stone as she sprung forwards. Acknowledging her intent, Phoenie turned and paced alongside her.

“It's a bloody trap, that's what it is!” said Joel, fingers twitching as he looked for something to punch. Theseus stood beside him, ready to redirect the younger boy's anger if it exploded into physical violence, but Joel released it in a stream of expletives. “It's those bastards from beneath the club,” he said, after taking a deep breath, “I knew something was wrong, I *knew* it. Kao was having an argument with...” he winced, “With Shell. I dunno what about, I didn't hear it, just...shouting and stuff...But then they were walking away together! It wasn't right. Dude, I could feel *it* in the air, I'm sure of it,”

Katrina pulled an auragraph from a brown envelope and passed it to Phantasia. The image was fainter than usual, but she could make out basic shapes and auras. The figures she assumed were Kaori and Shelley were walking away from the school, their auras suppressed and encircled by chains of shadow.

“There was no time to develop a decent image,” explained Katrina, clutching the ever-present Kit close to her chest, “But I think this is proof enough.”

Joel's fear struck Phantasia seconds before the words exploded from his mouth. “It's a trap! He told me—he said to tell you to save them if you can. That you can't fight them. That you'll pay for trying.”

Theseus put a hand on Joel's shoulder and the ginger-haired boy began to tremble. “I don't care for that demon shit these guys go on about,” he said to Phantasia, “But my gut's tellin' me this is Godhand's work. That bloody Bishop's been after Shelley for a while now, thinking she's some kinda witch.”

Joel slammed his fist into Theseus's abdomen. “Dude, it's that fucking *demon*! It's got 'em both, it's gonna drain 'em, and it's all because of me. I'm...I'm gonna *kill* it!”

Theseus, unfazed by the attack, shoved Joel backwards and stared him straight in the eye. “Grow the hell up, Gibson. This *ain't* a demon. We go gatecrash this party and we're all as good as dead. Why'd you think Mr Payne ain't doing shit like this? Think he's going to send the Haans in to bust the place up? Hell no! He'll—“

Phantasia waltzed over to the church's entrance and rolled up her sleeves. Phoenie was quick to follow.

“What are we going to do?” asked Katrina, “We're powerless against something like that!”

Phantasia glanced back at the humans. Theseus had stopped lecturing Joel and they were both watching her, waiting.

“*You're* all staying here.”

As she ran down the hill, she could hear their protests, sense their movement as they started to follow her, but she couldn't stop. This was something she had to do alone.

If they followed, they'd be putting themselves in danger. At least this way, by the time they caught up, she'd have saved Kaori and Shelley and dealt with the leansídhe.

Quite how she was going to do that, she didn't know.

*Time to start improvising, Princess, she thought.*

\*\*\*

The leansídhe was still nesting in the same – now burnt-out – warehouse from Phantasia's previous encounter. She could feel the familiar auras of Kaori and Shelley lost in the darkening mist, like two flickering candles about to be extinguished. As she crossed the boundary into the charred remains of the warehouse, she could feel the leansídhe stir to unnatural life, its menacing features etched into the aether as if somehow the air itself had been rendered apart. Phantasia closed her eyes and composed herself, drawing as much strength as she could muster from the decrepit landscape.

*There's no time to waste. The others will be here soon. I can't be afraid.*

She picked her way through cobwebbed corridors. It would have been easier to just phase into the heart of the building, but Phantasia wanted to conserve as much of her power as possible, and if Joel was right, if this was a trap, she couldn't reveal herself too soon.

A rusted metal door led onto a balcony that overlooked the depths of the storage area. The fire had devastated the already derelict interior, and in some remote corners she could still see it burning away on beams of rotted wood or abandoned crates. The majority of the damage, however, had been to the floor where the pyre had sat – now a crater leading into a basement below.

It was in the middle of that pit of ruin that Shelley gathered fuel for another pyre, while Kaori sat on a slab, a small knife clutched in a shaking hand. Above them both, hanging from the ceiling in a web of shadow, the leansídhe was watching, its form now more humanoid than ever. It noticed as Phantasia slipped down into the pit, but didn't act.

*I'm not a threat any more.*

Phantasia crept towards Kaori, forcing her limbs to move through the mire of darkness surrounding her. With each sluggish step she took, the darkness thickened and it felt as if Kaori was getting further away the closer she got. Her friend was just a few short steps away...

"Well look who it is, Kaori! It's Phantasia, my wonderful new girlfriend! She's so much better than you, I'm glad you're going to die so I don't have to suffer your pathetic moaning ever again!"

Joel was standing there – or at least an illusion of Joel. The ginger-haired Raven wasn't the most muscular of humans, but this fake Joel was almost a skeleton, his skin stretched tight across his bones and his eyes lost deep within their sockets. It was as if the leansídhe had resurrected the most traumatic, twisted nightmare of Kaori's boyfriend from her mind.

"You can just sit there and watch," it said, "Sit and watch while I take her and Shelley and do with them what you never let me do with your ugly, fat body. You know Shelley and I have been at it all this time. I mean, I had to be getting it from *somewhere*, didn't I?"

Kaori was silent, tracing the edge of the knife along her pale arm. Phantasia reached out to grab it, but a sharp pain slashed across her wrist. Sparks of dark energy were dancing around Kaori like black lightning, shielding her from Phantasia's touch.

"Come on, 'Kao', it's almost time," said the fake-Joel with a smirk, "Your mother's one helluva musician, your cute little sister has real friends, and you? You can't even keep a slacker like me around. What've you got left in this world?"

"Noth—"

"You *do* have friends!" snapped Phantasia, "And Joel's on his way here right now! Don't listen to that thing!"

"Listen to her; she's trying to pretend nothing is going on. But you know it, don't you, Kaori? You know what's going on—"

It was then that, at the worst time possible, Joel and the others arrived. Standing above the pit, they wouldn't be able to see the leansídhe or its power, just Phantasia and the two girls. Only when Katrina developed the auragraphs she was now taking would they see what was really going on. Joel, ignorant of the danger and determined to save his girlfriend, was already scrambling down the collapsed masonry, ignoring the cuts and bruises he received along the way.

"Kaori! Kao, snap out of it!" he cried as he ran towards her. Phantasia wanted to stop him, but the darkness had seeped into her body and prevented her moving. Even her voice was just a pitiful whisper, drowned out by another, malicious tone that brought Joel to a trembling halt.

"Look at what you've gone and done," said the fake Kaori, "You can't protect either of them! Some boyfriend you are,"

"Kaori..." he stammered, now completely oblivious to the outside world, "I'm sorry, I don't know...didn't know...I'm useless, I know..."

The Kaori that shambled towards him was covered in her own blood, a thousand self-inflicted lacerations across her body. Joel tried to avert his eyes, but the leansídhe's allure drew him in.

"Useless? *Useless?*" the fake-Kaori laughed, "Joel Gibson, you're easily the worst boyfriend I've ever had. Yeah, you thought you were the first, didn't you? As if you fell for that crap! It's just been one bastard after another with me. I thought you were going to be different. I should've known. Look at what you've done to Shelley!"

"It—I didn't—I couldn't—she just..."

"Face it, *you're* the reason we suffer!"

"SHUT UP!" screamed Phantasia. She didn't care about the darkness eating away at her. She didn't care if it killed her or if her wings burst to life for all to see. She couldn't let it continue! With all the effort she could muster, she pushed aside the crushing forces keeping her in place and put herself between the fake-Kaori and Joel. She could feel the darkness slashing at and tearing into her ethereal body. With great effort, she faced the leansídhe's deception.

"You're just an illusion!"

The fake-Kaori glared with bloody eyes, then twisted into the form of Joel and turned to face Kaori, who was still locked in her trance.

"You know..." it began, but Phantasia was there once again. Though the black lightening tore at her, she reached into the darkness and took Kaori's hand.

"Kaori, you know it's not really true. Your heart doesn't believe it, does it? You love Joel so much that you must be afraid of losing him, but don't worry, that love just proves there light inside you!"

"Forget it, girl, you're just an evil—"

"I told you to shut up."

Again she stared down the shadow, and again its dark power sparked around her, but this time it was weaker. Then its form changed, but this time it took on the image of Shelley, dressed in the sort of elegant dress and corset Phantasia would have associated with Kaori and the Ravens.

"I thought love was supposed to make life special? But because of it, my life is in ruins." the fake-Shelley looked at both Joel and Kaori, "What's the point? I thought love was eternal light that would save me from the darkness, not condemn me to it..."

Phantasia reached out with her free hand and grasped Joel's arm, an idea forming in her mind.

"Both of you listen to me. It doesn't know what it's talking about, okay? It's just your own fear. How can it understand love? It *wants* you to suffer, to give it power. You've just got to ignore it!"

She stepped back so they could see each other and willed their true feelings to reach through the dark miasma, using her as a conduit. If she could just encourage those feelings, those warm emotions she'd experienced from them in the past, maybe she could repel the leansídhe's spell.

*Please...*

Joel stepped forward and reached out for Kaori's hand. She dropped the knife and took it, before Joel pulled her into an embrace.

"Can we go away from here now?" she said "Please?"

"Yeah," said Joel, looking like he had woken from a bad dream, "Dude, this is too much,"

"Joel?" Kaori was looking at him. Small dark sparks danced around her, but were unable to break past an invisible barrier that now kept them at bay.

"Yeah?"

"You *do*...you know? Right?"

He nodded, "Ah, 'course I do."

But even as the couple shuffled away to the edge of the pit where the others were waiting, the leansídhe diverted its attention. A dozen crackling tendrils shot out from its web to ensnare Shelley, who sat locked in a nightmare atop a meagre stack of palettes and charred wood.

"Burn, bitch, burn!" said the voice of Astrid.

"Shelley, stop!" cried Phantasia, but the full weight of the leansídhe corruption was slowing her down again. There was no way she'd be able to reach her friend in time. Already Shelley had produced a lighter and her finger twitched at the flint as the leansídhe pushed her to the edge. Her suicide would strengthen the demon beyond anything Phantasia could handle, giving it the power to destroy her...and all her friends. The darkness forced her to her knees.

"What the bloody hell is going on here?"

The pressure relaxed enough for Phantasia to look up. Theseus had thrown the lighter from Shelley's grasp and now carried her limp body in his arms. She rained feeble punches down on his chest, but he brushed them aside just as he had Joel's.

"Theseus, don't listen to it," said Phantasia, her voice strained, "If you hear a voice, it's an illusion, it's not really who you think it is! It's a demon!"

"What bloody voice?" he said, his face showing a mixture of disgust and confusion, "You people make me freaking sick sometimes. Shelley's having a mental breakdown—" he brushed her off as she tried to claw his face with dirty hands "—and all you care about are the shadows?"

He didn't believe in it. It had no power over him. His body was radiating a confidence and determination that repelled each and every attempt the leansídhe made to claim his fear, and with each failed attempt its shadowy mass deteriorated and its radius of influence shrunk.

"Come on, demon-spawn, don't let these losers drag you back into that horrible world again!" said fake-Astrid as the demon returned its attention to the easy target, "If you die, you can rot in Hell with your dear mother, and maybe you'll find your real father down there!"

"Shelley," said Phantasia, "Don't listen to it."

"But," she said, her voice a dry whisper, "She's right, even if she's not really Astrid. I'm just a freak who doesn't belong in this world, and I'm going to die soon anyway..."

"What the hell is that sort of talk?" said Theseus, letting Shelley back to her feet now she was no longer trying to attack him. She looked so small and frail compared to the

proud, leather-jacketed boy, whose arm she clung to for support, and his presence made it difficult for the darkness to weave its way back into her heart.

"You're not a freak," said Phantasia, "I know what it's like to be different to everyone else. It makes you wonder who you really are and if you really belong in this world. Sometimes... Sometimes I've even wondered if I'm a demon myself!"

Theseus had his arm around Shelley's shoulders and was guiding her away, while the leansídhe strained to maintain its grip.

"Well maybe I am a demon," Phantasia continued, "Maybe I don't belong in this world. Maybe...is just *maybe*! I'm me! Who cares about what anyone else thinks?"

Shelley frowned. "You, you're stronger than me..."

"No! You're strong too, I know you are! You can't give up hope!"

"I-I want to be...like you..."

The leansídhe's grip faltered and its tendrils slithered back into its web. The humans were beyond its control now and the shadow began to ooze down towards them. Phantasia made sure to put herself between it and her friends.

"You need to get out of here," she said as the leansídhe began to take shape behind her, invisible to her human companions, "I'll deal with the rest."

"Ms Celeste, a-are you sure?" asked Phoenie.

"Dude, it's dangerous!" said Joel, who looked like he would jump back down and help her if Kaori wasn't holding him back.

"Phantasia can do it," she said, "She's special, remember? Even in the darkest night, there's always a light. That's what she told us, remember? I believe that—" she smiled down at Phantasia, "I believe you're that light."

Joel cheered, as did Phoenie and Katrina. Theseus rubbed the back of his neck, a look of bemusement on his face. Shelley reached out towards Phantasia with her small hand, as if they could somehow touch over the distance between them.

"I believe in you!"

Phantasia held her head high and waved a salute at her friends, then turned to face the darkness. It had gathered together all its tendrils and webbing into a single, monstrous form, a humanoid shadow that oozed with translucent corruption, a cancerous strain of mana that would grow even more powerful if left unchecked.

*I have to believe in myself. My friends believe in me.*

But, as Phantasia was about to focus herself to face the demon, its body distorted and a dark shape slipped out of the black slime. As the darkness began to recede, she recognised the waterfall hair and royal armour, and her focus broke. Aura cracked with corruption, eyes dark with power, Prince Dionysus stood before her once again.

"It's been a while, Princess," he said with a wide smile, "To think you really believed me dead."

## Chapter 12

### Phantasia's Power

She took one last look back, but the shadows had given up the chase. They were safe at last, and their skirmish along the border between the Innerworld and the Underworld was over. Above them, hazy and far away, the continents of the faerie world drifted around the concave aether.

"It seems it was worth the effort," he said as he turned the splinter over in his hand. To Phantasia it was just a vermilion gem, but she knew Dionysus could see more than that. He was the prince of the Water faeries, after all.

“Will it help?” she asked, watching as his blue eyes penetrated deep into the secrets they had unearthed. A shattered fragment of times gone by, he'd told her, one of uncountable many that drifted through the aether. He knew more about this than she did.

“A little,” he said, “Although there are many more pieces to find. If the knowledge I am seeking was so easily found than many more would have uncovered it.”

They settled down on a rogue island, its only feature a small oasis whose water cascaded into the abyss. Dionysus sunk into the water, using the power of the gathered elemental energy to replenish his stamina, while Phantasia sat dangling her legs over the murky depths. Looking into the darkness reminded her of a question she'd wanted to ask.

“Why did Calypso become a demon?”

Dionysus seemed lost in thought, and Phantasia turned to see him studying his reflection with a sad face. “Why does any faerie become a demon?” he said after a long pause, “For power. Calypso was afraid of...” he turned his back to her and looked up at the distant lands above, “She feared you, Phantasia. There are those in our Queendom who never agreed with Queen Thetis's decision to adopt you. When she made you a princess – her sole princess – that rift widened.”

He rose from the lake and whipped his waterfall hair back. “The wars have brought corruption into our elemental nature, and the influence of human emotions cannot be underestimated. Calypso sought an alternative method to achieving her goals and embraced the darkness.”

“But I thought darkness killed us?”

He came and stood next to her, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Only if we allow it to. If we cannot endure and expel it from our system in time, we either allow it to destroy us, or embrace it. You could say, then, that those who fear death become demons.

“We know there is no end to our existence – we either reincarnate or allow ourselves to become one with the Goddess – but there are still some who fear that. When we reincarnate, we do not simply 'start again'. It is a new life as a new person, informed by the lessons and mistakes made in the previous life. Some, however, still cling to the present. Darkness gives them the power to cheat the cycle and continue on forever.”

Phantasia, overwhelmed by the complex systems that governed life and death, walked down the side of the island and kicked her feet in the waterfall. “I'm never going to understand this stuff, am I? I'm just not normal enough to see things the way everyone else sees them,”

“I was thinking,” he began, “About our relationship. During my years in the Outerworld, I learned a great deal about how humans relate to one another. I still do not understand the terms exactly, and find the concept intriguing. We faeries are not born as humans are. We do not have a family, nor are we born of another.”

Phantasia turned and a smile began to sneak across her face. Dionysus always cheered her up when he admitted that there were things in the world even he didn't understand. The sight of his furrowed brow and thoughtful eyes helped her relax. So long as she had Dionysus, she would be safe, she thought. He looked down at her and she caught a brief glimpse of embankment in his features. He winced at the human corruption flowing through him.

“I believe I regard you as what humans would call a ‘sister’,”

\*\*\*

Phantasia didn't want to believe it. She knew it was just the *leansídhe* reading her fears, that deep down she knew Dionysus would never have embraced the darkness, but still she found herself backing down. She couldn't even meet the fake-Dionysus's eyes and clutched her shoulder for comfort. Maybe, just maybe, the *real* Dionysus could protect her.

“How pathetic,” said the fake, “Still clinging to that dead memento, still wishing I could come along and save you? I can't believe it led you here. I thought you were bright enough to figure it all out, but it looks like I was wrong. After all I did for you, I find you trying to fit into the *human* world? Did the truth escape you that quickly?” He took a step towards her, darkness dancing around his body like fire, “Princess, you're a demon. Deny it all you want, but it's the obvious truth.”

“I...”

“What's the matter? What happened to that rebellious faerie I knew? The one who was determined to prove herself to everyone? Has she finally been defeated? Has she finally given up, knowing that she is a freak of nature? Has she fallen so far as to associate with mundane humans in the hopes of carving out an identity? Is this all that remains of Phantasia Celeste, the girl I called 'sister'?”

“I...”

“Look at you, so pitiful and helpless. There's nothing you can do now, is there? You have no special powers that can save you. Remember all those teachers who tried so hard to educate you? Do you remember what they said when you couldn't do simple tasks? About how pathetic and useless you were? That you would never amount to anything?”

Phantasia remembered. She remembered all the things they had told her. She remembered all the times she would stand around while her peers worked their natural powers. All these years she asked herself what her element was, or whether she even had one. Even demons like the leansídhe had elemental affinity, so what was she if she had nothing?

The fake-Dionysus placed his hand atop hers, sending pain searing across her shoulder and down her arm. She screamed out as the darkness began to devour her and he lent in close, enough so she could feel his cold cheek brushing against hers.

“Accept me,” he whispered, “With this power those humans won't stand a chance. We'll pull out their deepest thoughts and fears and finally you'll be able to understand them. Their sacrifice will awaken your true self,”

“I...”

*Phantasia can do it. She's special, remember? Even in the darkest night, there's always a light, that's what she told us, remember? I believe that... I believe that she's that light.*

“I'm not a demon!”

She felt it inside her, the force she'd felt before, and without thinking about it, she allowed that power to flow through her body. The fake Dionysus staggered backwards and struggled against an invisible wind, then crumbled away, leaving only the diminished form of the leansídhe behind. Its illusion was over, as was its attempt to destroy Phantasia. Once again, it was afraid.

“I won't let you escape,” she said, “Thanks to you, I understand,”

The leansídhe, which moments ago had her at its mercy, was now slivering away but before the demon could move further, she dived towards it, fingers outstretched. The moment they brushed against the dark shadow, the leansídhe froze.

“You're just a shadow,” she said.

In one last, desperate attempt to escape, the leansídhe's body exploded into a mass of electrifying tendrils that surrounded Phantasia like a cocoon and tried to crush her under their power. But Phantasia understood now. She knew how to shield herself from the darkness. If only Dionysus were there to see her shine.

*Was it always so obvious?*

She swept her hand through the dark shell, recalling her happy memories of her 'brother', and of the belief her friends had in her. She could feel them now, encouraging her, and imagined the looks on their faces when Katrina developed the auragraphs. When

she saw the leansídhe's expression screaming out in front of her, she almost felt sympathy for it.

*But you're just an amalgam of other people's fear. You don't even have a heart. I won't let them suffer in this shadow any more.*

She felt her power radiate from every inch of her body, purifying the darkness like a light illuminating a dark room. The leansídhe tried one last time to hurt her by taking the form of a demonic Dionysus before it was washed away in the streams of newly-purified mana.

*I'm not a demon! I have a power! Faye, Queen Thetis, Dionysus, everybody – I finally understand!*

She was brought out of her thoughts by Kaori's echoing voice. "Phantasia? Phantasia, are you okay?"

Her friends had lowered themselves down into the pit and were running over. Above Mr Payne stood watching with several other teachers and adults.

"I-I'm fine," she said, "It's gone now,"

"You exorcised the ghost!" cried Phoenie, "This is amazing, absolutely amazing! And to think we have auragraphic evidence as well! This is going to be the biggest scoop ever!"

"Well, whatever these freaks are saying about the whole ghosts and goblins crap, you sure helped these girls," said Theseus, "Gotta give you respect for that at least,"

"You-you're amazing," said Shelley.

Phantasia felt that warmth rise up inside of her again, only now she understood what it was. The positive feelings of her friends, their compassion, their happiness, their love. After all these years, she finally understood what it was like for a faerie to bathe in her element.

\*\*\*

The ride was far from comfortable. The back of Mr Smith's old van was strewn with tools that rattled with every slight bump in uneven roads the suspension couldn't handle. Joel and Kaori were huddled under a tattered grey blanket while Shelley still clung to a disinterested Theseus, who sat looking out the dirty windows with a frown on his face. Near the front of the vehicle Phoenie and Katrina eavesdropped on the conversation between Mr Payne, Ms Booton and Mr Smith, which Phantasia could hear as clearly as the spluttering of the van's engine.

"I figured Wotan was playing that thing, letting it kill those Raven kids so his lot didn't have to," said Mr Smith.

"Payne, we've gotta deal with that bastard already," growled Ms Booton, "We can't keep skirting around in the shadows like this. You know things are coming to head already, you should do something before someone gets killed,"

"The Bishop isn't about to kill anyone, I'm sure of that," said Mr Payne, "This is an elaborate game for him. He's waiting for us to make a mistake and foil ourselves,"

"Rembrandt," began Mr Smith with a sign, "I gotta wonder sometimes if you're just doing the same thing yourself. I mean, those kids could've got killed today, like those others did. You think Wotan would've stepped in just 'cause they're your students?"

There was a silence, in which Phoenie and Katrina began whispering among themselves about the revelations. They stopped when the van began to slow.

"I've got to weigh up our options," said Mr Payne.

Ms Booton scoffed. "Better hurry up then, or your students will make the move for you,"

The van stopped outside the school and Mr Smith opened the back doors, throwing brilliant light into the cold interior. He winced at the sight of the students and beckoned them out.

“Sorry you kids had such a rough ride,” he said as they disembarked, “Never thought I’d be smuggling my students outta a place like that but, you know, Godhand and all that...”

“I’d like some kind of report from anyone willing to offer one,” said Mr Payne, giving Phoenie a knowing look, “Kaori, Shelley, your mothers are waiting for you inside. The rest of you are free to leave,”

Theseus untangled himself from Shelley and walked off, throwing back a half-hearted wave. “I was meant to be seeing Amanda tonight, Rogan. I hope your little ghost hunt was worth it.”

Phoenie scoffed and walked in the opposite direction, towards the school, with Katrina in tow. Kaori followed, dragging Joel behind her, while Shelley hovered around Phantasia.

“Phantasia, I’d like to speak with you after I’ve seen Phoenie,” said Mr Payne, “I imagine you have the, eh, most complete idea of what happened back there,”

The teachers made their way towards the school, leaving Phantasia with Shelley.

“I’m so sorry I did this to you,” she said, looking everywhere but at Phantasia, “I don’t know what happened. I’m always causing you trouble. I’m so sorry,”

Feeling a fragment of darkness splintering Shelley’s heart, Phantasia stepped forward and hugged her. “Don’t worry about it. We’re friends, right? Friends are supposed to help one another!”

Shelley was trembling, and no matter how hard Phantasia tried to purify that seed of self-loathing in her heart with her new-found power, the darkness refused to relent. Shelley pulled herself away and made a sudden break for the nearest entrance, her aura closing itself off from Phantasia as if her heart were trying to hide behind a cloak.

Even with her new understanding, Phantasia felt powerless.

## Chapter 13

### **This is who I Am**

The headmaster sat hunched over his desk, face hidden behind his hands as he contemplated what his students had told him. “If they’d found you, Godhand would have arrested you all,” he said. He leaned back on his chair and sighed. “I’ve known about these ‘leansídhe’, as you call them, for a few days now. We thought the sudden spate of suicides was a bit strange, but it was Kaori Shimomura’s attempt a week ago that got us investigating. As you know, her mother is one of my staff, so it was doubly important I did something,”

“Do you know who’s controlling them?” asked Phantasia.

Mr Payne thumbed through a pile of papers and pulled a dog-eared folder out. “Everything we’ve got on them is in here,” he said, before pulling out a single sheet with only a few rough notes scrawled in the corner, “As you can see, it’s not a lot. Every time we think we’ve found something, the path just leads to Godhand. Either they’re secretly behind this – which would call their very dogma into question – or they’re following the same leads we are and are constantly one step ahead of us,”

Phantasia was sitting on the edge of a leather chair that was far too big for her. Mr Payne’s office, which overlooked the front grounds of the school, was filled with all manner of cupboards and desks displaying a variety of mementos from old trophies and family pictures, to polished relics and leather-bound tomes. Some of the drawers even had magical protection, suggesting that Mr Payne was either capable of magic himself, or had

contacts that were, but quite what he would want such powerful security for, Phantasia didn't know. Away from the questionable area of the office, photographs of every current student adorned a wall, arranged neatly into house groups, and above them sat a professional image of the thirteen primary teachers posing in their colour-coded uniform. Mr Payne, as head of the four houses, stood at the centre of them, dressed in black and white.

"I still don't know much about this Godhand thing," she said, "They don't seem very friendly,"

"Godhand?" replied Mr Payne, raising an eyebrow, "Oh, of course, I guess you wouldn't have heard of them before. It's a 'religious' organisation that's existed in some form or another for centuries. Some say it started among the first to resettle the wastelands outside the big cities, others that it came from tribes who had never been to the shelters and had struggled to survive in the post-nuclear world. Maybe, back then, it wasn't the aggressive power it is now.

"At some point or another, the Patriarchs who rule Godhand decided that the only way to achieve peace in the world would be to eradicate magic, and everything connected to it, from novice witches right up to the demon kings and faerie queens. Since then they have practised a rigid dogma that punishes each and every deviation from the rules.

"They have power and influence because people give it to them, and people give it to them out of fear. Godhand takes away the natural fear of the supernatural, while itself using fear to keep its followers in line. Here in Torsten they started off with little influence, but over the years they've built up popular support because of their ability to deal with 'outside excursions'."

"Demons?" asked Phantasia.

"Pretty much, yes. It's a tricky subject," said Mr Payne, glancing around the room with a faint smile, "That was originally *our* purpose. When I was a student here, there was no Godhand presence. We were openly trained to survive in the outside world, and teachers and former students would protect the town. Not long after I became a teacher here, Godhand showed up and started muscling their way into our territory. They began to convince people that we caused the trouble ourselves, and over the next ten years they managed to increase their influence to the point it is today. Now we're seen as opposition – heretics, if you believe some – so we have to keep a low profile. If we don't, and if Godhand finds a way of 'exposing' us, it would be disastrous." He focused on a distant point, as if lost in some hazy childhood fantasy. "Bishop Wotan has been trying in earnest to bring us to 'justice' for years,"

Phantasia shifted in the chair. "If everyone wants to protect the town, why can't you just work together? Why fight? The struggle is only causing people pain!"

Mr Payne chuckled. "I remember your Queen Thetis saying the same thing, once."

Phantasia's wandering gaze snapped towards him and for a moment her mouth sat agape as she struggled to find words. Queen Thetis herself had lectured him? *And he hadn't even listened to her?*

"Well, why can't you?" she asked. Mr Payne cringed.

"Because... we're only human, Phantasia," he said with a resigned sigh, "We do what we believe is best, and since everyone believes something different, that eventually leads to conflicts. Unlike you Fae, we're not blessed with the knowledge of the heavens and for all any of us know, death is the end of everything. In the end, faith is all we have."

For a moment, the lines in his face deepened and his eyes sank, as if somehow he had aged a decade, and his aura had retracted into a dense weight. Maybe, she thought, she'd been too harsh on him. She'd been told that, even with their advanced experience, human adults were often as fragile as the children they sought to nourish and protect.

"We're not blessed," she whispered, "Even we can fear death,"

Mr Payne pushed his glasses up and smiled. "Absolutely, no one among us is perfect, after all. Now..." he shuffled through his files, "There is something I wanted to ask you, our resident – what did they say – 'psychic'?" He looked up with a raised eyebrow and grinned.

Has Phantasia been human, she would have blushed. Instead she smiled sheepishly and tried to hide behind her hair. "I had to tell them *something!*" she said.

"Indeed," Mr Payne said, laughing, "Queen Thetis did ask that we not disclose your identity without just cause, not only because sometimes people react badly to such news, but also because of—"

"Godhand?"

Payne nodded. "Yes, exactly."

Phantasia looked down at the floor and sighed. "I don't like lying to my friends, though," she said, "How can I protect them if I lie to them?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you about, actually," said Mr Payne, "See the incident earlier was something we'd rather avoid in future. Had it not been for your presence, I really don't want to know what could have happened,"

A *disaster*, thought Phantasia, shuddering at the thought of the leansídhe consuming her friends one by one. Even Theseus wouldn't have been able to escape it.

"In the current climate, with Bishop Wotan's gaze focused on us adults, we're finding it more and more difficult to deal with these matters. Any help you could provide would be, well, invaluable,"

Phantasia looked up. "If I can tell them the truth, it'll be easier for me,"

"That's your choice," said Mr Payne, relaxing back in his chair, "I'm sure Queen Thetis will understand."

Hopefully, thought Phantasia, she would.

\*\*\*

Phantasia spent the night recuperating from her ordeal, bathing in the positive energies of the church and turning over her thoughts in her head. Learning to feel the flow of her natural power and focus it with intent was a skill she would have to spend some time working on – she couldn't always rely on natural instinct to kick in under pressure, as it had done earlier.

"Interesting," mused Faye, her totem swaying in an invisible ocean above the church roof, "It would indeed appear that the hypotheses of Prince Dionysus and Queen Thetis have been proven correct. This power you speak of would seem to combine traits from the separate elements, thus suggesting you are a natural elemental conflux that—"

"Thanks, Faye, I think I understand," interrupted Phantasia before her handmaiden could give her an over-long lecture on the subject.

"Of course, Princess, my apologies."

Phantasia looked up at the moon from atop the church spire. There was always the possibility that someone might look up and see her there, but she didn't care. It was probably a good thing that she was the only one who could see the floating, ethereal dolphin though.

"I've gotta protect my friends," she said.

"I see," said Faye. Her stoic reaction told Phantasia that her handmaiden hadn't been reading her thoughts.

"I'm going to tell them who I really am," she added with a big grin. With unexpected speed, the dolphin spiralled around her body until Phantasia felt as if Faye were standing right there in front of her.

"That is not a wise decision," she said.

"I think it's the best way," replied Phantasia, meeting the dolphin's stare.

“Humans do not accept our kind with ease,” said Faye, “They will be distrustful of you. The friendships you have garnered will be tested. There is no logical reason for you to reveal yourself at this time.”

Phantasia made sure that their eyes met across the aether. She wanted Faye to understand her conviction in this decision, even if she didn't understand the decision itself.

“I'll have faith in them,” she said, “Just like they had faith in me.”

Faye's totem floated there for a few moments, and Phantasia wondered what was going through the Water faerie's logic-ruled mind. Faith, certainly, was not something they believed in.

Faye's voiced echoed across the gulf between the worlds, emotionless in nature, but with a trace of both defeat and, Phantasia thought, maybe a little encouragement.

“...if that is your wish...”

\*\*\*

The next morning, Phantasia was heralded as some kind of superhero, said to have banished an evil demon ghost from the darkest of hells. Her teachers gave her knowing looks, but all she received from some students were scowls.

“Heard about your little excursion, Albino,” Astrid said during morning break, “Exorcising demons without a license? Do you know the punishment for that?”

Phantasia wanted to snap a comeback at the self-proclaimed ‘Inquisitor’, but was held back by Kaori. Astrid didn't gift them with a reply, flung her long ponytail over her shoulder, and left them with her head held high.

“It's not worth it,” said Kaori, “She doesn't have any evidence, so she can't do anything unless you're provoked into reacting...”

Kaori was speaking to Phantasia again, and acting as if she'd never started ignoring her. Phantasia found it a curious reaction, but was happy they were friends again. Joel also seemed to have changed and now wore a more serious, determined look on his face. He was also clutching a handful of books he'd acquired from their English teacher, Ms Anderson, but would only say they were for ‘further reading’

Neither Joel nor Kaori seemed to mind when Phantasia was accosted by Shelley, although Kaori did give the Hawk girl a rather contemptuous look when she noticed what she had started dressing in the same quirky style Phantasia was becoming known for. She'd even attempted to style her hair with the same side-parting.

“You're my new idol,” said Shelley, “I hope you don't mind, but the things you've said are the nicest thing anyone has said to me...”

Shelley spent that lunch hour latched on to Phantasia's arm like a leech – albeit a pleasant, if talkative one. The most disapproving looks were no longer coming from Kaori, but from Shelley's own social circle, whom Phantasia was beginning to grow wary of. Vincent, their apparent leader, had shown very little concern for his friend's attempted suicide. The Hawks sat in a corner, watching her with eyes akin to their namesake, unaware she could see their piecing glares as if they were standing right in front of her.

That afternoon, when lessons were over and most students were heading home, Phantasia was stopped by Phoenie, whose overdramatic arm gestures and twitching movements suggested she had something exciting to talk about.

“Katrina's had the auragraphs developed!” she said, dragging Phantasia along the corridors to the classroom she used for their office. Inside, the whole *Veritas* crew, alongside Kaori and Joel, were gathered around a table looking at a selection of auragraphs.

“These ones clearly show the 'leansídhe' feeding on Ms Shimomura and Ms Edwards, as well as its true demonic form!” explained Phoenie as she thrust image after image into Phantasia's face. Indeed, the pictures showed the leansídhe's true form

gorging on the corrupted mana surrounding Kaori and Shelley, while a luminous Phantasia's sought to save them. In the last of the images, a blurred, badly angled shot that looked like it had been taken in a hurry, Phantasia could see the blurry silhouette of white butterfly wings, filtering a pale rainbow of colours.

"If only I were free to publish them..." sighed Phoenie as she collapsed into her chair.

"Can't be publishing things like this while Godhand's around," said John, "Whether this is a demon or not doesn't matter, Bishop Wotan'll use the evidence for whatever ends he desires. In this case, well, you know what'll happen..."

"Bastard's gotta be brought down sooner or later," said Theseus, who was once again by the window, taking little interest in the auragraphs.

Katrina gathered the pictures up in a brown envelope and handed it to her editor. Phoenie held it for a few moments, looking at it with sad eyes. "It's such a shame. All the effort we go through to expose paranormal and occult happens, and there is nothing we can do when we finally gather some solid proof!" Theseus stifled a guffaw, while Phoenie slumped back into her chair.

"Don't worry, there'll be a time," said Andromeda, placing a hand on Phoenie shoulder.

"I hope so," said Phoenie, "I'm worried though. Have you heard the rumours? The ones about Ms Celeste being a witch?" She looked at Phantasia with a sad frown, "The Inquisition will be investigating you for sure..."

"Phantasia can deal with the Inquisition," said John from over the top of his computer, "Besides they're only rumours, right Phantasia?"

Phantasia giggled, and then burst out laughing. Her friends were looking at her with curious eyes.

"They *are* rumours, right?" asked Joel.

"I mean, a psychic isn't the same as a witch!" added Kaori.

"Oh, I'm not a witch," said Phantasia, hands on hips and a grin spreading across her face, "I'm not really a psychic either!"

Even Theseus was befuddled by that statement. He looked like he was about to jump down from his perch, declare her a fraud, and use it as proof Phoenie was crazy. Phoenie herself, meanwhile, was shaking her head in disbelief. Phantasia was more than ready to deliver the revelatory blow.

"I'm a faerie!"

Theseus laughed so hard he fell over, while John had to hide his snorting behind his laptop. The others just stared in stunned silence. To prove her point, Phantasia walked through a table, and then somersaulted into a glide.

"See?" she said, giggling, before returning to the ground.

"A—a—a..." began Phoenie, her mouth flopping open and shut.

"A faerie?" whispered Kaori, "A real faerie?"

"Dude..." was all Joel could say.

John played with the hi-tech glasses he kept around. "Is she some kind of super-advanced hologramatic being?"

"Shit, some bastard's spiked me real good," said Theseus as he looked around in a frantic panic.

"Yeah, I'm a faerie," said Phantasia again, relishing the reactions, "Bet you weren't expecting that, were ya?"

"M—Ms Celeste, I'm—I'm... I don't know what to say!" began Phoenie. She paused for a second, as if in thought, "What was I going to say?"

"You were off with the faeries again," said Theseus, dusting off his jacket.

"We were talking about the front page story," said a confused Andromeda, "Big exciting news about..."

“...about the new sports facilities we’re getting,” finished John.

Phoenie’s eyes lit up and she shook her head, as if discarding a lost memory. “Oh yes, of course, I was completely out of it there for a moment! Sorry, Team, very unprofessional of me.” She handed the envelope to Amanda, asking her to file them in the cabinet. The quiet girl had a look inside, then shuffled over to put them away.

Phantasia saw it all, though. She herself had been struck by a momentary sense of vertigo as the wave of magic spread across the room, but as a faerie, she had quickly brushed it off. It helped that it was a weak illusionary spell anyway – but it was magic, nether the less. Wind faerie magic, often used to keep humans unaware of mystical things.

Someone, somewhere, had just altered everyone’s memory.

## Chapter 14

### An Audience with Wotan

Amanda checked herself over in the mirror one last time. She wiped away the remaining beads of sweat with the rough paper towel and adjusted the clip keeping her dark hair from falling into her eyes. That clip was important to her; it was a present from her boyfriend, Theseus, and it kept her strong in the difficult times of 'undercover placement'. Times like now. She could feel her heart beating faster and faster through the brown envelope she clutched to her chest. She hated doing what she was being forced into – her friends would never forgive her – but she had no choice.

She crept out of the toilets, peaking around the door to see if anyone was around. The corridors were deserted – everyone would be busy in lessons – and she hurried to the back of the school. They were already standing there, waiting for her. The short, snarling Vespa, the tall, glaring Elizabeth, and their leader: the prim, extravagant Astrid. Compared to them, Amanda was just a frail girl in a big coat. After checking once more to see if anyone was watching, she shuffled over to the trio of Inquisitors.

“You have them?” asked Astrid. Amanda handed her the envelope.

“T-they’re a-all there,” she said, taking a few cautious steps backwards. It would do no good, she thought, there was no escaping now.

“Good girl,” said Vespa, her cruel mouth curled up in a sneer.

“I’m sure the Bishop will overlook your parent’s recent misdemeanours now,” said Elizabeth.

Astrid was looking at the contents of the envelope, her eyes wide and lips mouthing barely audible exclamations. When she had seen enough, she carefully placed the documents in her bag.

“My father will certainly take this news seriously,” she said, “This is all the evidence we’re going to need to have these heretics brought to justice. Congratulations on passing the test.”

\*\*\*

The Sapphire-Emerald science class gathered at the far end of the school playing field, in an area bordered off by barbed wire fence. This was the domain of the school’s science teacher, Ms James: a woman whose bipolar voice struck fear into even the most courageous of students, among whom she was considered a pyromaniac at best, and a psychopath at worst. A concrete shed, guarded by a myriad of locks, cameras and alarms, sat in the corner of her playpen with its door half open, revealing a disturbing glimpse at the rows of boxes and racks of firearms inside. It was common for Ms James to disappear into her shed during breaks and after school hours, and rumours told of the sounds of

whirring machinery, strange smoke and cackling laughter coming from within. Some students even said she hoarded enough weapons to supply an entire army.

“PLASTIC EXPLOSIVES!”

The class grimaced in unison as their teacher yelled in their ears. “This stuff is way brilliant; just watch what it can do!”

She pressed a button on the remote in her hand, and a small box at the far end of the enclosure exploded. Phantasia was the only one who didn't flinch when the wave of heat buffeted the group. Their teacher clapped her hands together at the reactions.

“And that was just a tiny amount; imagine what a whole load of this stuff could do! Isn't it brilliant?”

The class mumbled in agreement as their teacher went on into an elaborate speech about chemical reactions. Phantasia enjoyed the science teacher's rather overzealous approach to teaching, more so than the majority of her peers. Only Joel and John seemed interested in the science of “blowing things up”, as Ms James frequently described it. Emerald-Second was filled with girls – though Astrid's little clique was missing today, along with Phoenie's friend Amanda – who were more disturbed than fascinated, while Doyle was more concerned with staring at Ms James' twenty-something figure than listening to her. She seemed aware of this, and would always pick on him.

“Doyle looks like he can't wait to get involved!” she said, before ushering him forward.

“Miss, why are we learning to plant explosives?” asked Joel.

“To test your understanding of chemical reactions!” she replied, “Only by handling them yourselves will you come to appreciate the raw power of science!”

Doyle returned from setting up the clay-like substance and its detonator, and managed to produce a perfectly reasonable explosion, much to his teacher's delight. The rest of the class took it in turn to try it themselves, with class clown Angelo moulding his clay into an obscene shape beforehand, and Kaori failing to set the detonator properly because she was afraid it would go off in her face. Phantasia had no problems with hers, though she found the whole thing somewhat crude. There were faeries and demons who could cause explosions on a whim.

“So what have we learned today, guys?” asked Ms James at the end of the lesson, though there was no time to answer before she continued, “We've learned another way to blow things up! For homework I want you to come up with examples of practical uses for plastic explosives, with bonus points given for anything we can try in class!”

As the class were walking back to the main building, leaving Ms James locked in her shed, Joel stopped outside the gymnasium and ruffled his ginger hair.

“Dudes, don't you think these lessons are getting stranger every term?” he asked. “I know things are always a bit odd round here, but the school I was at a couple of years back was totally different. I mean, way stuffier. Science never involved weapons!”

The others shrugged and looked around at each other for an answer.

“They're just preparing us for the outside world,” said John, “My dad's always said other schools are too insular,” – he noticed the confused expressions – “You know, telling everyone to stay in the boundaries, where it's safe. Nowhere's safe outside Malkuth, though.”

“Plastic *explosives*, though?” said Joel, “Dude, when the hell are we gonna need that?”

The group continued on their way into the school. Phantasia could understand why they might need the various skills they'd been taught, but she didn't want to say anything for fear of reprisal. Ever since the memory-altering incident she'd decided to keep her mouth shut regarding anything supernatural. Everything from Kaori's suicide to the students' various encounters with the leansídhe had been blocked from their memory and replaced with illusionary lies. It wasn't even a semi-decent illusion though, and certainly

not anything on par with what Prince Freyr or Queen Áine would have been capable of, which made Phantasia wonder just who was responsible. It annoyed her to think that everything she'd worked towards had been compromised by an outside – and obviously rogue – source, and she wondered just how much she could push things before another rewrite occurred.

It wasn't all bad news, though, as her friendships still remained intact (proof of just how shoddy the spell was, she thought). No sooner had Phantasia put her bag down when her arm was tugged away by Shelley. Kaori was in the middle of talking and glared in silence at the Hawk girl, as Phantasia allowed herself to be escorted around a corner to where Shelley's friends were gathered. But just as they started their usual vacuous hellos, Phantasia was dragged away again, this time by Kaori, who wanted to finish what she had been saying. Moments later, Phoenie interrupted, insisting on her own private audience.

Unable to cope with everyone vying for her attention, Phantasia pushed her way out of the common room and fled into the fresh air. The bustling kaleidoscope of auras was fascinating to watch and wade through, but sometimes the clashing egos and chaotic emotions that rippled through mana were just too much for a faerie to handle. Phantasia took a deep breath and allowed the more peaceful aether to soothe her aching head. She stopped when she felt a familiar aura, and found Dante sitting on a low wall, his legs swinging back and forth as he studied the clouds above.

"They got too much for you?" he asked, not taking his eyes off the grey sky.

"Just a bit," she said, sitting on the wall next to him, "I wish they could all just get on with each other."

"Ah, well that's human nature for you," said Dante, "You've got a reputation, everyone wants you for something. They all want you in their group, but not in anyone else's,"

"It's frustrating," she said with a long sigh, "Why are humans so complicated?"

Dante chuckled to himself. "You know, sometimes you sound like you're not human..."

Phantasia's thoughts froze for a second. She couldn't quite tell from the faint smile on his face whether he meant that, or if it was just typical human hyperbole. "O-of course I'm human!" she said, hoping to cover herself, "I'm just different!"

Dante chuckled to himself. "Yeah, that's why there's such a fuss," he said, "People get curious about new things. Then they get scared."

Phantasia breathed easy again at the change of track. Dante shot a rare glance her way and frowned, then returned his gaze to the clouds.

"And if you're too different," he continued, "They'll hate you,"

\*\*\*

Rembrandt Payne looked up from his desk, first at the familiar red and white robes, then at the greying blond hair, and finally settling his gaze on the smug smile that deepened the wrinkles of Bishop Wotan's face. He tossed a brown envelope onto Payne's desk and waited in silence for the headmaster to peruse its contents.

"Interesting, wouldn't you say, old friend?" said Wotan as Payne's face fell at the sight of the auragraphs. He knew the story behind them, even if he had forgotten it briefly, but had no idea how the images could have come into the possession of Godhand. Phoenie was one of the top second-year students, and one of the most cautious.

"They certainly appear to be fine works of art," bluffed Payne, "Were you hoping to set up an exhibition?"

Wotan crossed his arms, his eyes fixed on Payne's own. "Let's not joke around, *Siegfried*. We have identified some of your students in these images. It would appear they were somehow involved in a dangerous ritual with demonic connections. As you are no

doubt aware. Godhand takes such things with the utmost seriousness, especially in these darker days.”

Payne glanced at the pictures again. The real world was hazy and indistinct behind the auras and energies that dominated the images, but he could make out figures in the mist. Then Wotan handed him some more images he had been keeping under his robes.

“As you can see, these girls were easily identified,” he said, as Payne grimaced at the close-up shots of Shelley Edwards, Kaori Shimomura and what appeared to be self-portraits of the photographer, Katrina Ritches.

“Technology certainly has come a long way,” he said, stalling for time. There was no escaping this one. Wotan had him cornered, and with a deep chuckle at the headmaster’s floundering, he handed him one final image. Payne’s skin turned almost as white as the shining aura with butterfly wings.

“Certainly not the sort of thing I’d be expecting to see from a mere human teenager,” said Wotan with a satisfied smirk, “Would you mind telling me exactly who – or what – this is?”

Payne stared him down. “No, I’m afraid I wouldn’t.”

Wotan raised an eyebrow but didn’t reply. He’d have expected defiance anyway. He gathered up the auragraphs, gave a polite bow and edged back towards the door.

“I’m sure you’ll understand that my Inquisitors will have to investigate this incident,” he said, “I’m sure it would be beneficial for both of us to remove any *unsightly* elements from this establishment before they corrupt your young students.”

After the door clicked shut behind flowing robes, Payne pulled himself out of his chair and took the cell phone out of his pocket. The day he’d been both dreading and anticipating had arrived at last.

\*\*\*

The Sapphire-Ruby music class was held in a bright, spacious room chosen for its acoustic advantages rather than lecturing efficiency. The thirteen students were spread out in small groups, each gathered at a set of desks adorned with old keyboards dusted off and retro-engineered by Mr Smith and his staff. Working with headphones, they would explore their musical abilities before discussing their work with each other and their teacher.

Phantasia found the whole process difficult. Music just wasn’t her thing, even though she’d always enjoyed listening to the soothing concerts held by troops of Wind faeries when they passed through the Water Palace. She could string a few notes together, and she could mimic any tune laid out in front of her, but composing her own songs left her in a rut. Joel, on the other hand, was a natural, so working in a group with him and Kaori meant she spent most of her time helping him develop instead. Pressing a few random keys, she wondered what Princess Titania or the other Wind faeries would make of the human symphonic instrument. Lyra, sitting across the room with Byron, Doyle and Vincent, was said to be able to ‘see’ music, but Phantasia doubted it was on the same scale as the elementals of wind. They could see entire symphonies of twisting patterns and colourful shapes, using their illusionary powers to express them to those less gifted.

Ms Shimomura paused the class to play a simple melody on flute, which she explained would help soothe their nerves. Kaori, and the rest of the students, assumed their teacher was just a talented musician, but Phantasia could feel something else behind each perfect note, as if they were enchanted with Ms Shimomura’s own feelings.

The classroom doors slammed open, silencing Ms Shimomura’s melody and shattering the calm air that had descended upon the room. In a gust of silk and blonde hair, Astrid swept into the room, flanked by her ever-present lackeys.

“Be quiet, woman,” she snapped at the teacher just as Ms Shimomura was about to protest, “We are here on official business, sent by my father, the Bishop, himself,”

Astrid waltzed across the classroom, peering at each group of students with a smug grin on her face. At their desk, Joel was shaking and Kaori held his hand tight. Phantasia glanced up from her keyboard, feeling Astrid's aura pricking her skin as she approached them. Astrid looked around the desk, sneered at Kaori and settled her sights on Phantasia.

“Albino, you're coming with us,”

Joel slammed his fist down and stood up, knocking his chair over in the process. “You can't just walk in here and act like you own the place, you--”

Vespa moved forward to subdue him, but the students were stopped by Ms Shimomura.

“Ms Garland, if you have business with Phantasia, I would ask that you take it outside the classroom,”

Astrid scoffed and spun around, flicking her hair over her shoulder. “Follow me, Albino,” she said.

Phantasia stood up, wishing she could reassure Kaori and Joel and the rest of her friends that she knew what she was doing. Joel's face was ashen and he was mouthing at her to not go, like he wanted her to stand up to Astrid and Godhand and begin the inevitable rebellion that would save their town. She could see it reflected in his aura, and the auras of all her friends, as they reached out to clasp on to her.

“I'm glad to see you won't be making a fool out of yourself,” said Astrid, glaring back at the irate Joel, “Rash actions will cost you dearly in the future,”

Phantasia followed them out of the silent classroom, willing her friends to understand – if only she were telepathic! - and hoping their teacher would be able to calm the inevitable storm of emotions. Once down the corridor, Astrid stopped and the trio surrounded their victim.

“My father, Bishop Wotan Rosencrantz Garland, has requested your official arrest on charges of witchcraft and heresy,” she announced, “I am to escort you to his manor, where you will be rehabilitated. If you refuse to comply, we shall be forced to take more drastic measures and your friends may also be brought in for interrogation,”

Phantasia nodded. Astrid looked disappointed at her silence stared at her for a few moments longer.

“Well, if you have no objections...”

“I don't,”

It was an opportunity she'd been hoping for since her talk with Mr Payne: an audience with his adversary and the chance to put an end to their childish quarrel. Astrid watched her with narrow eyes, no doubt suspecting trickery of a sort.

“Then follow me,” she said, “And don't you dare try anything stupid,”

\*\*\*

Phantasia was bundled out of the polished limousine with the same rough hands that had forced her in. As the vehicle glided away, Astrid marched towards the front doors of the mansion.

The heart of Godhand's presence in Torsten lay at the north of the town, where Phantasia had noticed a tower being constructed during her vigils atop the church. Compared to the rest of the town, the hilltop mansion was a paradise of mown grass, arranged flower beds, moss-less walls and glistening clean windows. Only the skeletal clock tower in the background ruined the pristine image.

“Take a good look, Albino,” said Astrid, pushing open the large wooden doors, “This is what those who follow faithfully receive.”

If the outside was an untarnished paradise, Phantasia was lost for words to describe the interior. The floors were polished like mirrors, soft carpet cushioned her naked feet, staircases spiralled upwards, red drapes framed walls adorned with all manner of artworks from across the ages – it made Torsten Academy look like a slum.

“Of course, you won't be enjoying these benefits,” said Astrid, leading the way across the lobby towards more large doors, “As a heretic, you must repent for your crimes before you can saviour even a drop of luxury,”

Astrid led her across a courtyard, in the centre of which lay an empty podium. Various red-robed followers of Godhand moved about their own business, some giving her cold stares while others were too afraid to look at anything other than the gravel path they followed.

Astrid flung a finger sideways. “*That* is a proper school.” she said, “Our private education far exceeds anything those mentally deranged 'teachers' at that hovel can achieve,”

Phantasia wanted to ask Astrid why she wasn't attending lessons here, if the teaching at Torsten Academy was so terrible, but figured it would be best not to antagonise her. Reaching Bishop Wotan was more important than understanding his daughter's odd situation and she could always try and ask him – it wasn't like Astrid would give a decent answer!

They reached the far end of the courtyard and stopped. Phantasia was reminded of her own church: the tall doors were adorned with carved figures and framed by stone guardians, while the windows told colourful tales. Astrid continued on her way after admiring the display, Elizabeth and Vespa on either side of Phantasia, perhaps concerned that she might try some fancy trick. She entertained the idea in her head, rather than listen to Astrid's increasingly repetitive spiel about how wonderful the manor was. How would any of them be able to stop a faerie, after all?

Inside the church-like antechamber they ascended a set of spiral stairs, leading to the floor above where yet more large doors confronted them, while behind them a balcony overlooked the vast courtyard.

“This is where you will understand your sins,” explained Astrid, hesitating before the doors, “And I expect your pathetic little friends to follow.”

This final room was the most exquisite of all. Red and gold-trimmed velvet drapes framed artistic displays and artefacts dated back centuries with more care than she'd seen before. The archaic relics were locked and preserved in spotless glass cases, much unlike the old cabinets used in the school, where the relics were often brought out in lessons for the students to handle. Above the displays sat a rim of stain-glass windows, featuring images of saints and miraculous deeds. The appearance of obvious demon forms suggested these legends reflected more recent history than those from the millennia-old church. As her gaze continued upwards, it settled on a dark window high up the far end of the chamber, beyond which she could make out the shadows of the clock tower's skeletal beginnings. When Astrid came to a sudden stop, her eyes fell down to the dais that adorned the end of the room. Flanked by curtains and two cowed guards, Bishop Wotan sat presiding over her arrival on an ornate wooden throne.

“The albino heretic,” said Astrid, bowing to one knee before her father.

“That will be all, Astrid,” he replied with a curt gesture, motioning her to leave.

“Can I not help with the interrogation?” she asked, shocked.

“I would prefer to be alone with this girl,” said Wotan, motioning for his guards to leave also. He stood and looked down at his daughter and her companions, “You three girls return to your school. There is nothing more for you to do here.”

“But, Father, I—“ Astrid clutched her dress around herself, her knuckles white.

Wotan's expression remained unfazed by the sight of his pleading daughter, as if his face were etched in stone. “You have your orders,”

Astrid waited for a half second, then spun to confront Phantasia one last time. Brushing her hair back, she sneered. "I guess I won't have to look at your pasty face again, Heretic freak," she spat. Lifting her skirt off the floor, she waltzed out, Elizabeth and Vespa following, giving Phantasia victorious smiles as they passed. She was thankful she could defend herself better against their unintentional psychic attacks.

Once they had left, slamming the large doors behind them, Bishop Wotan sat down again. Compared to her first encounter with the stern-looking man, his appearance had softened somewhat. In a way, he almost reminded her of Rembrandt Payne, only his aura was more ragged, as if it had been dragged through the dirt.

"I apologise for my daughter's behaviour," he said, "It is rather ingrained, thanks to the dogma of Godhand. I had hoped Payne's lot would have eroded her harsher side somewhat, but it appears to have made things worse,"

"So, you sent her there on purpose, even though you have your own private school?"

Wotan chuckled to himself. "They said to infiltrate that place, so at the time I figured that was the best option. I'd never have imagined she'd turn out like this, though,"

"You're her father! She's your responsibility!"

Wotan shook his head. "You underestimate the power of the teachings," he said, "I have to act as is expected of me."

"Well," said Phantasia, relaxing, "To be honest, you're not acting as I expected."

"Did you expect a villain?" asked Wotan, "Just because I am opposed to your headmaster? Payne is no saint, let me assure you, and nor am I, of course."

Phantasia scuffed her feet on the carpet. That last thing she'd wanted was another debate on human morality! "I don't understand why you fight each other!" she said, "Why can't you and Mr Payne work together?"

Wotan laughed. "If only things were that simple, child! I would much rather not associate myself with Payne, nor the people he works for. That 'Academy' of his is one of many scattered across this continent that publicly states it is helping teach our children to 'deal with the outside world',"

"Well, at least it's not teaching them to fear everything!" said Phantasia, "You teach people to shut themselves away from – even destroy – everything that threatens your idea of order!"

Wotan stood and swept his robes aside. "And Rembrandt Payne turns children into soldiers for war!"

Phantasia staggered back, Wotan's sudden outburst stunning her.

"Have you never thought to question their teaching methods?" continued Wotan, his voice calmer but still tinged with a sharp edge of resentment, "Were it not for me, those lessons would be far more blatant! With Godhand pressuring them, they can't teach children how to wield weapons and magic for war. Antagonise Godhand and its dogma all you want, but at least it doesn't teach kids how to fight." He sat down again and nursed his temple.

"Just to hate anyone different to them," snapped Phantasia.

Wotan didn't reply.

"I don't know much about your Godhand – nor do I know a lot about Mr Payne or whatever he works for, but..." Phantasia took a few steps forward so she was standing at the bottom of the dais, "I'll do whatever it takes to protect my friends. I don't care for your stupid wars!"

Wotan frowned, a melancholy chuckle escaping his throat. "Well then, I should probably explain why I brought you here, then. It certainly wasn't to 'rehabilitate' you, but I couldn't explain the truth to Astrid."

Phantasia scowled at the prospect of being used in someone else's devious scheme.

“You see, earlier I was presented with some images that I found most fascinating.” he continued, “It would appear one of Payne’s students has gotten her hands on a camera capable of capturing electromagnetic fields.”

Phantasia froze. Had Wotan seen *those* auragraphs? And *how*?

“I have a list of Payne’s students that were involved in an incident recently that happened to involve a demon. From the evidence we’ve acquired, we have more than enough to convict several of them of witchcraft...”

“They had nothing to do with it!” cried Phantasia. Wotan smiled.

“Kaori Shimomura, daughter of suspected heretics Yuki and Li Shimomura; and Shelley Edwards, daughter of suspected witch Endora Edwards – both of these girls would be valuable assets in our campaign against Rembrandt Payne,”

“It was my fault!” cried Phantasia, “I’m the one who confronted that demon! I’m the witch!”

Wotan laughed and raised a hand. Phantasia recognised the two-fingered sign he made – a sign used in human magicks. She felt a force explode out of the floor and ethereal chains dug into her body, rooting her to the spot and suppressing her senses.

“It’s just a simple constraint spell,” he said in a matter-of-face tone, “Designed especially for a Fae of your level. I realise how unpredictable you can be, and I’d like to keep you around for a while longer.” He clicked his fingers and several robed figures slipped into the room from a back entrance.

“Go to Payne’s ‘academy’ and arrest the students Kaori Shimomura, Shelley Edwards and Katrina Riches. They are to be charged with heresy and witchcraft, and shall be rehabilitated.”

Phantasia struggled against the forces holding her down, but the magick was adapted to suit her. Far too much, she thought.

“You can’t hurt them!” she begged, “They haven’t done anything wrong!”

Wotan relaxed in his throne and smiled. “You are just a child,” he said, “A child with a naïve view of the world. It’s not about who’s ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, it’s about who has power. Conserve yours while you can. Your role in this charade will arrive soon enough, faerie girl,”

## Chapter 15

### Kidnap

At Torsten Academy, gossip spread fast and Phoenie Rogan prided herself on being at the forefront of breaking news. It was her job as editor of impartial school newspaper *Veritas* to filter the truth from the lies, after all. Some rumours just weren’t worth following up, but even the most common of meagre relationship scandals helped Phoenie to understand and predict her audience. A break-up here and an affair there could cause an avalanche of social disorder and redefine the borders of cliques and social groups – and so too could a mere rumour. Delivering the truth, therefore, was a burden of responsibility and one that Phoenie relished having.

There were times, however, when people stopped talking about their trivial relationship issues and focused their attention on a single person or event. Times when the waves of gossip pulled back, waiting for an almighty tsunami to crash into the shore and change everything. Phoenie had known, from their first meeting, that Phantasia Celeste was going to be riding the crest of that tsunami and, in the back of her mind, Phoenie knew there was a very obvious reason why. For someone who prided herself on her memory for details, the past few months had been nothing but frustrating – nothing ever seemed to click! Maybe the stress was becoming too much for her...

The current situation wasn't helping matters. She was sitting in the waiting room outside the staff area, attention fixed on the door to Mr Payne's office. Phoenie had heard the news of Phantasia's arrest as soon as it had happened, thanks to John Smith and the wonders of the *Veritas* intranet, and needed reassurance that someone was going to do something about it.

As soon as the headmaster opened his door, Phoenie jumped to her feet and strode into his office. It was an editor's privilege, she'd always told herself, to be able to converse with the staff on an equal level.

"I have a feeling I know what you're here for," said My Payne, moving over to his coffee machine.

"I would hope so too!" she replied, taking the warm mug of coffee he offered her. Regular meetings to discuss *Veritas* meant Mr Payne knew just how Phoenie liked her caffeine top-up.

"I'm afraid there isn't a lot I can do," he said, sitting down and hunching over his desk, "Bishop Wotan wouldn't take such drastic action without solid proof. If I were to move against his decision, it would taint the whole Academy's reputation. Godhand would have the leverage they need to waltz in here and arrest countless staff members and pupils – you included, I'm sure,"

Phoenie chewed her lip. Of course she understood the politics of it all – that was her job – but that didn't change her feelings.

Mr Payne sighed deeply and let his eyes wander around the room. "We've reached a turning point," he explained, "The town council could easily fall into Godhand's complete control – and they already have their sympathy – but it's not a matter you should worry yourself about, Phoenie. You're barely seventeen."

"So," she began, pushing the chair back with deliberate sloth as she stood up, "You'll be leaving Ms. Celeste to the mercy of Godhand?"

Payne frowned and avoided her piercing stare. "We will be watching how the situation develops. I would advise you do the same,"

Phoenie nodded. "I'll do my best, Sir," she said, and although that was the logical choice, she couldn't help wondering what alternatives there were – and there was *always* an alternative. The slight hint of a smile from Mr Payne as she left the room suggested to her that he knew just how difficult she'd find following his advice to be.

\*\*\*

Huddled together at the back of the school field, the group couldn't have looked more suspicious. Even hidden under a canopy of early-autumn leaves, Kaori didn't feel safe from the prying eyes of Godhand. She clutched Joel's hand tighter as her thoughts returned to Phantasia and the hell she would be facing.

"I told you, it's no problem of ours if she screwed up," mumbled Byron as he tossed another cigarette butt into the undergrowth. "And hey, I didn't mind the girl. She was quirky, even if she did believe in all that bullshit about love saving everyone's soul, or whatever it was,"

"Dude, she's our *friend!*" said Joel.

"Hey, I hardly know the girl," he replied, sparking his lighter against another cigarette, "Think I'm gonna go piss off Godhand by sticking up for someone I hardly know?" He took a deep drag and looked up at Joel from beneath the rim of his fedora, "Man, I'm not going there."

In a blur of motion and falling leaves, Lyra dropped down from her branch perch and kicked the aspiring poet in the leg with her steel-capped boots. He jumped up, cursing her as he dropped his cigarette.

"Maybe you oughta go back to sitting in a field and writing poncey rhymes about flowers," she snapped.

"I don't *rhyme*," he stressed, "Only *amateurs* rhyme."

Lyra raised an eyebrow and from her vantage point, Kaori could see her clenched fist. Lyra and Byron had never gotten on and Byron's self-centred perspective on the world always led to confrontations like this. But still, there were more important issues to deal with right now.

"Can we stop fighting and figure something out?" she pleaded.

"You can sort yourself out," said Byron, giving her a contemptuous look, "I'm outta here." Somehow Lyra managed to stay her fist as Byron turned his back and walked off.

"Dude was never one for sticking his neck out," said Joel "Can't blame him for watching out for himself, though. I mean, we're totally gonna get branded heretics ourselves if we try and rescue Phantasia,"

"But she'd do it for us," said Kaori. Something about the white-haired girl made Kaori think she'd do her best to rescue her friends if they were ever in danger, and she was sure she'd had some dream or another about it.

"Who gives a crap what Godhand thinks, anyway?" said Lyra.

Kaori felt Joel's grip tighten. "Maybe they do," he said.

\*\*\*

Byron was still trying to fathom out Joel and Kaori's inexplicable logic when he noticed it. Face hidden behind a cowl, the figure looked as if its robes had been bathed in blood. It walked with long, purposeful strides across the field, ignoring him as it made its way towards his three friends hiding in the shadows. The cigarette he'd lit only a minute ago slipped from his mouth and smouldered on the grass for a moment before he realised and stamped it out with his boot.

"Damn, that's Godhand..." he whispered. He took a few steps back and contemplated running for the school, but a sick sense of curiosity held him in place. Just what was going on? Had Godhand overheard their conversation? Were they going to be arrested for heresy? Was *he* going to be arrested for associating with them?

There was a scuffle. Joel was confronting the Inquisitor – his typical brash reactions – while Lyra was gearing up for an attack. Byron didn't envy the man on the other side of one of her punches. Then Joel made a pathetic swing at the figure – again, typical behaviour from a guy who thought he could fight – and the Inquisitor responded with a quick jab to Joel's stomach, which he followed up by tossing the boy aside. Byron cringed as Joel tumbled away, curled up in agony. Sure, he was a prick a lot of the time and his fiery nature grated with Byron's laid-back philosophy, but he was still a mate. Byron was too far away to make a difference though. Lyra was felled by a quick slap from the back of the Inquisitor's hand – she'd bear that grudge, and take it out on everyone else for sure – and the figure towered over a cowering Kaori.

It wasn't normal for Byron to feel the emotions that were beginning to force their way through his veins right now. He liked to avoid confrontation unless he knew he could win, and preferred to win through wit and knowledge rather than violence, but now was one of those rare moments where he wanted to charge in and smack a bat around the back of the Inquisitor's head.

Lyra and Joel were pulling themselves up, ready to strike back, and Byron thought he noticed them making signals to each other. In unison they sprung, staggering, forwards. It happened so fast that Byron didn't even see what happened, but both Joel and Lyra had been knocked down once again and Kaori was unconscious. Then two more robed figures swept past to meet with the first. Realising his chances of making a heroic rescue were non-existent, and lacking Joel's idiotic brash temper, Byron turned and walked as fast as

wasn't suspicious towards the school building, hoping someone better suited to fighting would step in, but knowing they'd all be busy with the sports club.

\*\*\*

Shelley glanced over at the rest of the group and dug her nails into the palm of her hand as she struggled to control the flow of self-deprecating thoughts that charged through her head like an army of insatiable werewolves. She played with the buttons on her white shirt and wondered if Phantasia was safe. The white-haired new girl was an awkward subject in the circle of Hawks Shelley loitered around with, with their opinions on her changing every day.

"That albino girl's not going to be securing you kudos any time soon, Vincent," said Elone, making tiny adjustments to her artistic make-up.

Vincent, arms crossed, hid most of his expression behind his long fringe. He huffed and Shelley could see him rolling his eyes through the curtains of hair.

"Like I care," he snorted, "It was a stupid idea anyway. That girl could've never been an idol. Should've guessed, it was Shelley's idea, after all."

Shelley looked at the red carpet to avoid his glare, her knee twitching to the point of spasm like some kind of hyperactive sewing machine. She wished Phantasia would appear and prove them all wrong, that she would return victorious from defeating Godhand, that she would put a stop to the persecution her and her mother had been forced to endure for half a decade.

But all Shelley got were the cold stares of her friends and the feeling that the gulf between them was widening even further. "She's not even one of us any more," she heard one of the first years say. "She was never in the scene to begin with," said another. "Just clinging on to us 'cause she wanted to be cool," shot a third. Shelley drew her knees up to her chest and tried her best to make it all go away. How typical that, no sooner had she made a real friend in Phantasia, than that friend abandoned her. How typical indeed.

"Yeah, that's Shelley Edwards there," she heard Vincent say, "Definitely something odd about her, I'd say. Saw her conspiring with that white-haired witch, you know?"

Shelley glanced up to be confronted by a wall of crimson and hidden high in its depths a cruel face scowled down at her. Every muscle in her body froze and all she wanted was to scream out, but a large hand reached around and cupped her mouth. The world faded.

\*\*\*

Katrina clutched Kit to her chest, breathing in the familiar scent of the stuffed toy. Most people thought she was childish for hanging on to the plush turquoise cat, but it was times like these that she valued his company the most. The thought of Phantasia at the mercy of Bishop Wotan and his fanatical cult was nauseating.

She noticed a familiar boy in a long white coat and black scarf, standing against the wall, his arms folded and eyes looking down at the floor. Dante was lost in one of his pondering moments, contemplating something about the world around him. Having lived next door to the boy since his parents abandoned him, she was used to his every nuance.

"You thinking about Phantasia too?" she asked. His eyes flicked up for a second and he shifted his weight.

"They must've had some pretty strong evidence to convict her like that," he said, his voice distant and dream-like, as it always was when he was turning theories over in his head.

Katrina scratched her temple. "Do you think she did anything bad outside school?" she asked, "Phantasia always seemed like a nice girl to me. I can't imagine her doing anything to get herself arrested by Godhand,"

Dante chuckled to himself and watched her with a knowing smile. "Phantasia's a bit strange. Too naïve, like she's putting up an act. I don't think she's even human."

Katrina grimaced. This was one of the reasons people would cross over the road if they saw Dante walking towards them.

"You not looked at your auragraph collection lately?" he asked, probably aware of what she was thinking, "You had a couple of pictures I bet Godhand'd kill for,"

Katrina thought back to the pictures she'd been developing. The auragraphic camera captured images of things invisible to the human eye, such as electromagnetic fields, but nothing that could be labelled 'heresy', even if Phoenie was insistent that it could take pictures of ghosts!

"Heh. So you don't remember then?" said Dante.

"Remember what?"

"The wings."

Katrina's thoughts began to distort, as if someone had gone back in time and changed history. One moment she was wondering what bizarre hallucination Dante had been having this time, and the next she was recalling cloudy images of auragraphs with butterfly wings, as if remembering something from her childhood or a surreal dream. Dante must have noticed the confusion on her face because he was giving her one of his rare half-smiles.

"Bet you thought I was having another 'hallucination'," he said, and then his expression turned dour, "People have a habit of forgetting things recently, like that monster attacking during the midsummer exams. Go on; tell me that was a hallucination too,"

Though they were like brother and sister, there were times when Dante's voice took on a harsh, accusing tone even with Katrina, and it made her feel ashamed for all the times she'd doubted him in the past.

"I'll go check the files," she said, "If I find them, I'll let you know. Don't worry; I think I can remember seeing those pictures too!"

Dante managed another half smile and closed his eyes, a sign that he was content with the situation. In the past, Katrina might have tried coercing him along with her, or just saying goodbye when she left, but experience had taught her that Dante was ready to be left alone. He didn't like getting pulled into things unless he knew exactly what he was doing, and he hated trivial conversation, hellos and goodbyes included. Most people thought he was impolite, but Katrina knew it was just his way. "Say what needs to be said and nothing more. Words are precious." she recalled him saying.

When she reached the *Veritas* 'office', Katrina found Phoenie sorting through some files on her desk with a puzzled look on her face.

"Hello, Kat," she said, "I've been having a few issues with the next edition of the paper, and would you know things just don't seem to be adding up? I've got a report from Andromeda on recent environment restoration developments, but my notes don't mention commissioning her to research it! And what on earth is a 'leansídhe'?"

"I don't suppose you've found any auragraphs of Phantasia?" asked Katrina.

Phoenie looked up and a bemused expression. "Sweetie, why would you take auragraphs of Ms. Celeste?"

Katrina shrugged and moved over to the filing cabinets. "Dante thinks I have," she said, knowing she had to choose her words carefully now, "He thinks our memories have been altered somehow."

Phoenie looked down at her notes, scratched her head and looked up at the ceiling, as she always did when digesting facts and figures through that logical brain of hers.

"Kat, are you sure you should be indulging in Mr Orpheus's fantasies?"

Katrina stopped her search and counted to ten in her head. "It would add up if he was right, wouldn't it?" she said.

"Well, maybe," said Phoenie, "It's just that, well, you know... Mr Orpheus is borderline schizophrenic. He really should see a specialist."

"He's not a schizo!" snapped Katrina. She took a few more deep breaths and calmed down, thankful Phoenie was used to her sudden outbursts. "I'm not sure what I remember is right myself. The past few months are so hazy, like I've been stuck in some kind of weird dream."

Phoenie stood and looked at her reflection in the window overlooking the courtyard. Endangered species of plants sat swaying in the autumn wind, while birds chirped from atop houses lodged in the branches of small trees.

"Well, I guess my notes haven't been adding up for a while..." she said, playing with the single braid of hair she kept running down the side of her face. "I was thinking..." she turned to face Katrina, "Maybe Ms. Celeste could help us? According to my notes, she's a psychic? I guess that explains why..."

"What were you planning to do about that, anyway?" asked Katrina. She knew Phoenie all too well: there was no way she'd sit idly by while a fellow student suffered Godhand's interrogation.

The editor cast a sad eye towards the piles of paperwork on her desk. "That's why I was looking through stuff," she said, "I figured that, if Phantasia was arrested for heresy, I'd have heard something about what she actually did 'wrong'."

"Nothing?"

Phoenie shook her head. "Not a thing. It's starting to give me a migraine, *and* I've run out of coffee." She bundled her files into her shoulder bag and shuffled over to the door. "I'll be back in five. I'm going to grab a coffee and see if John's around."

Katrina continued to rummage through the files, searching for any clues as to the auragraphs' existence. The more she thought about things, the more Dante's theories seemed true and as she looked through the files she began to notice things that had, for some reason, completely eluded her before. *'Report on Suspected Vampire Activity'* by Andromeda Katsaros; *'The Case of the Mysterious Dog of Unearthly Origin'* by Phoenie Rogan; and *'Experiments with Auragraphy: Auragraphs of the Dead [WARNING: CONTAINS DISTURBING IMAGES]'* by... *Katrina Ritches?*

She pulled the file out and was about to look inside when there was a knock at the door. Three knocks, to be precise. *Veritas* had a secret code, and that wasn't it. Katrina placed the file on a desk and crept towards the door. Three more knocks. She reached out towards Kit, wanting the familiar feel of his fur to calm her nerves. Before her fingers could even brush it, the door burst open behind her.

\*\*\*

Phoenie pushed the handle down with her elbow and nudged open the door with her shoulder, making sure not to spill her coffee. She hated it when the office was left unlocked, and the fact that Inquisitors had been spotted prowling the school only made her feel more uncomfortable. At any moment they could barge into the *Veritas* office and steal a horde of valuable research data Phoenie had compiled on the insidious cult.

When she saw the state of the room, her fears were manifest. Tables and chairs had been knocked out of alignment, while the secure filing cabinet had been left open and files scattered across a desk for anyone to browse. The most telling sign, however, and the one that struck dread into Phoenie's heart, was the lonely plush cat sprawled out on the floor, as if discarded by an unloving owner. Phoenie fell to her knees and clasped the vacant-looking toy to her chest, uttering curses against Godhand under her breath. They could be standing behind her listening to her every thought for all she cared. It wasn't like

Phoenie to get angry about anything, but this reminded her too much about her past, too much about how powerless and ineffective she'd once been. She was the editor of *Veritas* for a reason! *Get a grip, Phoenie Rogan! You've got to take reasoned action!*

Phoenie's march to the staff area took far longer than she would have liked – with each wasted second, Katrina would be taken further away – but she kept Kit held tight in her arms and paused for no one, even when Theseus came running up to her, still sweating from the midday sports club.

"They took Kat," he said, "Shelley Edwards too."

"They won't get away with this," growled Phoenie.

"You'll get no argument from me," replied Theseus "Makes a change, huh?"

John and Andromeda joined them outside the offices, sharing their stern faces. As always, news travelled fast.

"CCTV picked them up," said John, "Looks like both girls were drugged,"

"The staff tried to reason with them," added Andromeda, "But the Inquisitors just ignored them. Joel Gibson and Lyra Byrne are being treated for by Ms Clarke right now. Apparently they took a bit of a beating protecting Kaori Shimomura."

"They took Kaori too?" said Theseus, "The hell they can get away with four arrests in a day! This is madness! We gotta do something!"

"All you students can do is wait."

Mr Payne had appeared at the door to his office with a grave look on his face.

"Sir, this has gone too far!" protested Phoenie.

"I'm doing all I can, Ms Rogan," he replied, "Continue with your day until further notice." The casual tone Mr Payne always took around his students had vanished – this wasn't advice, this was an order.

"Now, if you'll excuse me..." he continued, "We're in a delicate situation and can't afford a single mistake."

He disappeared into his office and the door locked behind him.

\*\*\*

Rembrandt Payne wiped his glasses clean, his mouth fixed in a frown. He could feel some of his staff glaring at him, blaming him for not acting sooner and letting things reach this level, but he stood his ground. He glanced over to Yuki Shimomura. An outsider would wonder why, for someone whose daughter had just been kidnapped by religious zealots, she could be so collected, but Payne understood. Yuki was an empath and councillor just as much as she was a musician and audiomancer – emotions were her weapons and her armour, and understanding and controlling them was her job. If she broke down, she would bring everyone down with her.

"I don't like it," said Sabeen Haan as he paced back and forth, weathered trench coat swishing round with every about-face. "There's got to be something else we can do," His brother, Azarat, stood against the wall, his hand resting on the hilt of a sword.

"The cell is our safest choice at present," he said, his deep voice and calm as always, "If we act irrationally, we risk endangering even more lives."

"Well I don't like it either!" said Natalie Chiltern, the mousey young woman in charge of Nature Studies and revitalisation projects, "We can't stand around and do nothing, Payne! Those girls will be alone, at the mercy of Godhand! At least let me send a familiar to reassure them?"

Payne nudged his glasses up and sighed. "Godhand have protective measures around their manor, but if it will make you feel better, it's your risk to take. Just make sure they can't trace it back to you, or to us,"

"I still think we should blow that place sky high," said Lucia James, still dressed in her lab coat, a maniacal look in her eyes as she played around with a pistol, "Let's seem them trace *that!*"

Mythology teacher Valentine Baudin cheered his agreement as he swigged back on his omnipresent flask of liqueur, but the rest of the staff gave the Science teacher stern glares.

"In all seriousness," began Payne, "All we can do for the time being is wait and see what happens. I want you all on stand-by in case the situation develops."

Amber Thorburn, usually one of the quietest members of staff, coughed to draw everyone's attention to the spread of tarot cards she'd been analysing during the ruckus.

"I'd been expecting something like this," she said, "The pebble that starts the avalanche. All the little things that have been happening have been building up to this moment."

"And what about your psychic clairvoyance?" asked Payne, "Have you analysed the dreams yet?"

"As best I can," she said with a long sigh, "Phantasia is quite the girl. It's as if everything around her is distorted, completely unpredictable. And that girl is certainly at the centre of a lot of things right now,"

Valentine jumped off of the worktop he'd be lazing around on. "She took out those vampiric shadows, and now Godhand arrests her: it's obviously all connected," he said, "Maybe this will bring things to a close,"

Payne wanted to believe that, and he could tell his staff wanted to believe that, but other things were bothering him. Things he couldn't discuss in public.

"Valentine, you know as well as I do what Godhand is truly capable of," he said, "You ought to know, then, that there's something amiss with what we're dealing with,"

Valentine stared at his distorted reflection in his hip flask. "The Godhand I knew would've swamped this place years ago. There's no way they'd let a group like us have influence over anyone, let alone a bunch of kids."

"Exactly," said Payne, "Like it or not – and I know I don't – but we actually owe Bishop Wotan a thing or two, at least,"

Brian Smith choked on his coffee. "Payne, don't tell me you're going to trust that bastard?" he spat, "I don't care how far you two go back, he's still dangerous!"

Payne chuckled to himself as the memories played out in his mind. "I don't trust him. I never have. But there's more going on here than mere Godhand rehabilitation."

"You think it's something to do with Phantasia?" asked Amber, glancing back at her cards.

"Surely Godhand doesn't know who she really is?" asked Natalie.

"I have a feeling Wotan knows *exactly* what he's dealing with," said Payne, "And *that's* why I'm so interested in what he's really planning..."

The younger members of staff were eyeing him with suspicion, and he couldn't blame them. If he told them the story of 'Siegfried' and 'Wotan' – other than it taking all afternoon – they'd probably question his motives in this situation. Amber, the Haans, Yuki, old man Khandro, Brian Smith – they all knew the story. Maybe that's why they were all so concerned with his choices. Personal feelings and vendettas getting in the way of the mission, and all that.

*Just give me this last chance, he thought. Just let me get rid of this haunting past once and for all.*